

Australian government attacked for tobacco funding

Christopher Zinn *Sydney*

The Australian Medical Association has used freedom of information laws to reveal that the federal government is granting research and development tax concessions to the tobacco industry worth up to \$A500 000 (£200 000; \$320 000) a year.

The association's federal president, Dr David Brand, called on the government to scrap the concessions and said that, whereas it was generously funding research to develop high tar cigarettes for Africa, spending on tobacco control in Australia was "miserly."

"It's just incredible that the government is helping improve a product that kills 18 000 Australians a year and encouraging its export to third world countries," he said.

Documents released by the association, which it obtained under freedom of information legislation, give details of plans by the tobacco giant Philip Morris for numerous projects including the development of a longer and higher tar cigarette to satisfy the African market, which will be funded by the taxpayer.

The applications, made to the government in 1997, also include plans for a new filter to improve "smoker satisfaction," a small cigarette code-named "Mighty Mouse," and a machine to make 5000 cigarettes a minute.

The association said the government should redirect the tax concessions towards public health programmes. Whereas the federal and state governments earned \$A4.5bn a year in taxes from smoking, they spent only \$A10m on antitobacco campaigns.

But the minister for industry, science and resources, Senator Nick Minchin, said that it was wrong to single out the tobacco industry and apply any morality or public interest test for tax breaks to what was still a legal product.

"This is the first time I've heard it suggested that the government should discriminate against any industry that pays tax," he said, adding that the tobacco industry paid huge amounts in tax and was entitled to the concessions.

Cigarette manufacturer Philip Morris, which produces some of Australia's best selling brands, including Peter Jackson and Marlboro, said that from 1995 to 1998 it received \$A1.3m from the government.

Dr Brendan Nelson, a former president of the Australian Medical Association and now a back-



"Come Dancing," a ballgown shimmering with 5500 contraceptive pills and an intrauterine device—medical alternatives offering a woman 22 years of birth control—is the centrepiece of a new London exhibition. "Pharmacopoeia," artworks on a medical theme by Susie Freeman with Dr Liz Lee, is showing at Contemporary Applied Arts, 2 Percy Street, London W1P 9FA (020 7436 2344) until 15 April.

CONTEMPORARY APPLIED ARTS

bench MP, said that there should be an immediate end to the funding.

"There is no justification at all for giving away taxpayers' money

for anything other than reducing tobacco consumption. If the government's got this cash to spend it should spend it on antismoking campaigns," he said. □

UN condemns Australian plans for "safe injecting rooms"

Gavin Yamey *Sydney*

The first medically supervised injecting room for heroin users will open in Sydney in May 2000 despite last week's condemnation by the United Nations International Narcotics Control Board and opposition from John Howard, the Australian prime minister.

The supervised facility will have 10 bays in which users can inject, supervised by two health professionals, and clients will be offered supportive counselling and primary health care.

The UN is so opposed to the development that it is sending a

delegation to Australia this month to try to stop it.

The centre, based in the inner city district of Kings Cross, will be managed by the United Church Board for Social Responsibility, an Anglican organisation that supports local community projects. The Vatican has banned all Catholic groups from supporting the trial.

The initiative, which follows the success of similar "safe injecting rooms" in Rotterdam and Zurich, will run for an 18 month trial period, during which its possible role in min-

imising harm to drug users will be evaluated. The evaluation will be conducted by several research bodies, including the National Centre in HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research and the Institute of Criminology.

The state government of New South Wales recommended the trial and passed appropriate legislation for the trial after its 1999 drug summit, which brought together groups of drug users, parents of drug users, non-governmental organisations, and politicians. Although the Australian prime minister firmly opposes the trial, he has promised not to interfere in the state's activities.

The International Narcotics Control Board has accused the state of New South Wales of violating international treaties on

narcotics, claiming that the trial is "not in line with international conventions."

A spokesperson for the board said: "Any national, state, or local authority that permits the establishment and operation of such drug injection rooms also facilitates illicit drug trafficking."

The Australian National Council on Drugs, an influential non-governmental organisation which advises the government on drug policy, supports the trial as part of an overall strategy of minimising harm.

Brian Watters, the council chairman, said: "If it can be shown that supervised injecting facilities save lives, decrease infection rates, and reduce a number of other harms to individuals, their families, and the community, then we would support such an initiative." □